

## Rape, Power, Realism and the Fantastic on Television<sup>1</sup>

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‘You look so beautiful tonight,’ he says, gazing into her eyes. Instead of leaning towards him for a kiss, she stabs him in the neck with a fork. This scene, from television’s *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-9), makes sense primarily as a rape-revenge narrative and exploring televisual representations of rape can tell us much about how our understandings of sex, gender and power are scripted through conventions and their subversion. Indeed, Tanya Horeck suggests that ‘representations of rape are one of the prime locations for determining popular ideas about femininity, feminism and post-feminism’ (2004: 8). In the study of television programmes, it is worth noting that industry context and commercial imperatives inevitably influence the ways sexuality and violence are represented and Elana Levine notes that in the 1970s television ‘necessarily addressed the audience in ways that would be acceptable to advertisers fearful of controversy, to politicians fearful of public backlash, and to viewers fearful of radical challenges to their way of life’ (2007: 5). The same basic caveats still apply, despite gradual changes to popular thought and televisual representations.

Two forms of television drama, crime and fantasy, are compared here and while each example presents rape as a violent act that shores up male power, the nature of television and the conventions of genre inflect their representation of rape as a facet of gendered power relations in particular ways. While some crime shows adopt an aesthetic of gritty realism, fantasy is generally viewed as an escapist mode bearing little relation to the real world. Yet the conventions of fantasy potentially enable it to

address gender and sexuality with more freedom than a text anchored in realism. In any case, both realism and fantasy make deliberate choices about visual style which also inflect their representations. Examples used in this discussion might easily be described as ‘quality’ television, a term intended to suggest more about style and address than value. ‘Quality’ television generates discussion, from water-cooler chat to academic debate, and it is taken seriously partly because of its ‘literariness’. Its dramatic form is characterised by complex narrative and character development, affording scope for nuanced treatment of gender, sex and violence regardless of genre. ‘Quality’ television is also thought of as ‘cinematic’ and original programming from subscription channels like HBO attempts to distinguish itself by pushing televisual limits: ‘it’s not TV, it’s HBO,’ as the slogan goes. Jane Arthurs notes that ‘genres addressed to high-status audiences are allowed to be more explicit and controversial’ in their representations of sex and violence (2004: 24) and ‘quality’ television is aimed at just such an audience. ‘Quality’ television is provocative or challenging in terms of subject matter too, and the shows discussed here have all made headlines because they negotiate controversial issues, be it corruption in LA (*The Shield* 2002-8), inner city problems in Baltimore (*The Wire* also 2002-8), or wartime torture and suicide bombings (*Battlestar Galactica*). Such issues are obviously public and political, though gender seems more invisible (a personal matter) especially in an era where men and women are supposedly equal. Negotiation of gender in relation to contemporary society is, however, readily apparent in all of the shows and inflects their representation of rape.

**Crime and Realism: ‘You ever suck dick like a cell bitch?’**

Since crime drama is often characterized by an aesthetic of realism, adapting documentary-style techniques, there is the potential to interpret its representations of rape as more authentic. In addition, structure and dynamic also inflect representations of sexual violence as evidenced by *The Shield* and *The Wire*, both of which are forms of police procedural, and in this context rape is a serious crime with a victim requiring justice. Investigations in these shows emphasize analysis of evidence, while procedure foregrounds the ability to secure a conviction, highlighting two aspects of rape that have been critiqued by feminists since the 1970s. Cop shows traditionally focused on masculinity until examples featuring female protagonists, like *Cagney & Lacey* (1982-8), took a different approach. Recent trends in television mean that mainstream police drama has moved towards a more feminized form, now combining soap- or melodrama-style character development with action-based stories. While some still maintain that ‘male-driven cop shows fail to examine masculinity as an issue in the text’ (McQueen in Feasey, 2008: 84), I suggest that both *The Shield* and *The Wire* offer potentially strong critiques of traditional masculinity and patriarchal authority.

In *The Wire* each season focuses on a single case: season two begins with the discovery of 13 dead women in a cargo container on the Baltimore docks, a find soon linked to another female body retrieved from the river. This starts an investigation that uncovers theft, murder, drug trafficking, prostitution rings and corruption. ‘Hot Shots’ (2.03) suggests that all 14 women were being shipped in as prostitutes and the body found in the river belonged to a woman who resisted this role and fought back (since, unlike most of the other women, post-mortem swabs were ‘negative’ for vaginal, anal or oral sexual activity). This resulted in her murder, and then the murder of the other 13 women to cover it all up.

While a popular forensic drama like *CSI* (2000-present) and its spin off shows use reconstruction ‘flashbacks’ to provide spectacle, *The Wire*’s aesthetic of realism precludes flashback. As a product of HBO, *The Wire* pushes the televisual boundaries on profane language but its version of realism emphasizes the slow-moving, mundane aspects of police work rather than fast-moving action and effects-driven spectacle. Furthermore, crimes are often discovered after the event, so while in season two the bodies of the 14 women are shown, their prostitution and murders are not.<sup>2</sup> Despite the description and explanation of the murders inferring rape is the motive, the assault on the fourteenth woman is never actually called rape, or attempted rape. This draws attention to the fact that rape is overshadowed in an economy of crime and policing where sexual violence perpetrated against women is not a social or political priority. The social critique of the commodification of women’s bodies is explicitly foregrounded when one of the female police officers notes ‘you can tap a guy’s phone if he’s selling drugs but if he’s selling women he’s out of bounds’ (‘Backwash’ 2.07). Indeed, this critique of commodification is drawn out further as the women are never named, their identities remain a mystery and though the case is eventually solved, they are all buried anonymously as Jane Doe.

The mode of representation here has the possibility to be interpreted as an unconscious devaluing of women, in line with the view that so-called masculine genres exclude women and/or make men more important (see Feasey, 2008: 86, for instance). In *The Wire*, however, it seems to be entirely self-conscious: here, the problematic representation of women operates in itself as a critique. That is, it is designed to demonstrate how women, especially illegal immigrants smuggled into the

US for purposes of prostitution, are devalued by the systems they encounter; not only the criminal racket that profits from them, but also the legal system designed to protect people and seek justice for crime victims. David Simon, *The Wire*'s creator, intends it to show 'the lives of many in Baltimore as tragically bound by. . . institutions' (in Ethridge, 2008: 152) and specifically mentions how some characters represent 'excess Americans' who can never achieve the American Dream (155). His examples tend to be male, but *The Wire*'s women are far more obviously disenfranchized and invisible. Here, all of the criminals in the case are male<sup>3</sup>, with the exception of the 'madam' who 'chaperones' the women. As their discovery in the cargo container suggests, the victims are simply commodities, sold to male customers. Women are disposable objects of exchange, furthering profit-making and interactions between men: rape and sexual exploitation are simply parts of 'the vagaries and excesses of unencumbered capitalism' described by Simon (in Ethridge, 2008: 154), as this and other examples demonstrate (such as the girl used for sex by several men at a party in season one, whose body is left in a dumpster after overdosing). *The Wire*'s rape script inscribes female passivity and its female victims are never allowed voices to articulate their experience. Male agency is implicated in a wider critique of American ideologies as institutions form a corrupt, controlling patriarchy that commodifies citizens and denies them subjectivity and self-expression. In representing the rape script in such a way, *The Wire* draws attention to how women are systematically and violently disenfranchized which articulates a social critique in and of itself (albeit, not an unproblematic one).

A slightly different version of this scenario is elaborated in *The Shield*, which consistently explores masculinity. At times it adopts problematic strategies in

representing rape, exemplified in the Cuddler Rapist storyline from season three (so-called because he cuddles his victims for hours after the rape). The Cuddler's victims, older women, grandmothers, are understandably unwilling to discuss their violation and their adult children find it hard to come to terms with the fact that their mother has been raped. This is a side of rape rarely represented and it challenges several myths. No one can say a 70-year-old grandmother is 'asking for it,' and rape here is clearly about power and domination, not about sex. Yet, while audience sympathy for these women is clearly encouraged, they are *victims* not agents. Detective Holland 'Dutch' Wagenbach is the investigator who breaks the case so, despite the involvement of his female partner, Claudette Wymys, the rapist is brought to justice by a man and the investigation is seen largely through male eyes. Horeck notes how critics of the cinematic representation of rape in *The Accused* suggest that the character Ken's 'privileged point of view as the "hero" of the narrative is deeply problematic' (2004: 100) and that he functions as one 'good man,' a version of reformed masculinity (101) in contrast with the rapists. Dutch does this too, since he both seeks justice for the victims of several rape cases (just as detective Jimmy McNulty tries to find the identity of the dead woman pulled from the river in *The Wire*), and offers an alternative masculinity. Here, the rapes occasion a long confrontation between Dutch and another serial offender, a scenario Horeck identifies as common to rape stories: 'the bodies of raped women function as symbols of violent communication between men' (2004: 42).

Dutch exposes a false accusation of rape in season five, which focuses on an Internal Affairs investigation led by John Kavanaugh into central character Vic Mackey. During this investigation, Kavanaugh's ex-wife, Sadie, reports she has been the

subject of an attempted rape and asks for Kavanaugh's help ('Kavanaugh' 5.08). When Kavanaugh asks Dutch to look into the case, he finds the 'rape' was invented by Sadie to get Kavanaugh's attention. This may appear a trite rendering of another myth about rape – a woman accuses a man of rape as a way to gain power over him<sup>4</sup> – and certainly it pathologizes the female accuser and could be anti-feminist. Yet neither Sadie, nor the truth or falsity of her story is the point. The narrative focus is the struggle between Kavanaugh and Vic and it makes explicit the way in which rape articulates power between men. Seeing how upset Kavanaugh becomes over Sadie, Vic exploits this, having sex with her and then telling Kavanaugh ('Of Mice and Lem' 5.09). On the other side of this power struggle, Kavanaugh has already been in contact with Vic's estranged wife as part of his investigation and the implication is that he will rape her in retaliation. After a cliffhanger ending, the next episode ('Postpartum' 5.10) reveals that he does not, but this incident clearly presents women as objects used to demonstrate male power.

Another key event shows how rape can articulate male power without involving a woman: in season three of *The Shield* a male character is raped, not new territory for television drama, but still significant. Horeck argues that women in rape stories are sometimes raped to avoid men becoming 'rapeable objects' (2004: 50). Here a man becomes a rapeable object and rape is presented as directly and unequivocally bound up with notions of masculinity and power. One news article on *The Shield* reports how the 'boy's club' atmosphere of the set was dampened when filming what was referred to as 'the incident' and that tension was dealt with 'by engaging in macho banter' (Keck, 2004): thus, the actors too perceive this as an assault on masculinity.

The episode's title, 'Mum' (3.5) describes how 'the incident' is kept secret for some time. The victim, police captain David Aceveda, only tells his wife about it four episodes later ('Slipknot' 3.09) and notably employs more euphemistic terminology, admitting he was 'assaulted', not raped. Aceveda's rape transpires following a house search, when he is caught alone by two gang members and, with a gun to his head, is forced to perform fellatio on one of them. Since the rape is part of an action scene, not a reported crime (as with the Cuddler Rapist case), we see it in progress. Given this is network television, however, it is not shown in explicit detail. The shot starts from behind, masking the action, then moves to a low angle that mimics Aceveda's own kneeling position, so that *The Shield's* signature hand-held camera simultaneously provides visceral immediacy and conceals the details. The suddenness with which typical action shifts to violation is shocking enough: Lara Stemple has also suggested that 'men can't manage to glamorize rape when other men are the victims' (2003: 177). This rape is characterized by abjection and disgust and certain aspects function to 'explain' it. When the assailant asks, 'You ever suck dick like a cell bitch, Cop Man?' the recognizable context for male rape (the high incidence of prison rape) is evident. This may even imply that the rapist was himself a rape victim (we know he has served time recently) and seeks to reassert his own power and masculinity by turning Aceveda – a representative of the institution who incarcerated him, and by extension, made him rapeable - into his 'bitch'. Furthermore, this act is revenge for an assault on the attacker by Vic in a previous scene when, seeking information, Vic forced the pipe of a bong down his throat. That act directly mimics oral rape here, so the connection is unmissable (see Figure 1). This is not the only time that Vic's violent actions rebound on another character, he never pays the price himself, establishing him firmly as an alpha male (Vic is not rapeable, though other men may



be). Aceveda's rape is shocking, but it is just one part of a dynamic of male power enforced by violence and violation.

The rapist has another gang member photograph the rape on his phone and, as with other incidents of recording rape (see MacKinnon in Horeck, 2004: 83), this shows how some rapists construct their actions as events to be watched by others, perhaps because it is a *performance* of masculinity, as emphasized here. Issues of spectacle and spectatorship are raised and viewers are reminded that we are witnessing this violation along with other characters; the man who takes the picture seems repelled, or at least uneasy, encouraging a similar response in the viewer. Potentially the picture provides evidence of the rape, though Aceveda's position and political ambition mean it functions more as a trophy and as potential blackmail material, than to secure a conviction. Reinforcing the stigma attached to rape, Aceveda never reports the rape, instead he acts in future episodes to suppress this evidence, even abusing his power to have the rapist killed in prison.

*The Shield* thus offers a male rape script that explains the gender shift (the context of prison rape and revenge for Vic's violent actions) while the move from female to male victim demonstrates that gender and sex are not grounds for rape. As a key character, Aceveda's subjective viewpoint is the main perspective here. He is an innocent victim and undergoes typical difficulties in admitting the rape and dealing with the trauma of violation. Given the choice between dying and performing fellatio, Aceveda chooses to live and the show does not duck the fact that living means living with the consequences, personal as well as political; the effects are felt for at least another two years.

Like *The Wire*, *The Shield* critiques machismo but walks a fine line in offering Vic Mackey as a compelling character whose violent, corrupt exploits provide entertainment. While Rebecca Feasey notes that *24* (2001-present) seems to uphold machismo through its protagonist Jack Bauer – ‘we are being asked to overlook this man’s motives, his recklessness, his disregard for his family and his inability to face up to his personal responsibilities in favour of positioning him as a hard-boiled hero’ (2008: 89) – *The Shield* and *The Wire* both repeatedly draw attention to similar failings in their hypermasculine characters. McNulty’s excessive behaviour (drinking, womanizing, irresponsible parenting) is often presented as grotesque or even comic,<sup>5</sup> while Mackey is a villain as well as a protagonist. Furthermore, both McNulty and Mackey are part of an ensemble cast that includes a range of masculinities, making their hypermasculinity only one of many options. Vic in particular is also counterpointed by several strong female characters, though *The Wire*’s representation of women is more problematic.

While Shakima (Kima) Greggs challenges McNulty for lead detective in *The Wire*, she succeeds professionally by being masculinized. As a lesbian, she even has a wife and arguably her sexuality functions as an explanation why she is not like other women. Her performance of gender, like McNulty’s, becomes hyperbolic: in season three during the break down of her relationship, her drinking, sexual promiscuity and uncomfortable attitude towards family life mirror McNulty’s earlier characterization, while by this stage McNulty himself has become domesticated. Indeed, Greggs explicitly makes this connection, saying she is becoming McNulty. As an active female she is an exception on the show – as is the lawyer Rhonda Pearlman to a lesser

extent - with most other female characters being girlfriends or mothers who are uncaring, manipulative or disloyal. In order to be such an exception, Greggs' activity must be problematically masculinized.

Masculinity is an issue too for the construction of female detectives in *The Shield*, as the character of detective Claudette Wyms was originally going to be male (Ryan, 2002). Claudette is less obviously masculinized though and, according to one writer, she is the only character whom Vic cannot 'alpha male' (Mazzara, 2002). Like Kim, she is female and black but her age makes her convincing as a seasoned professional and her hard-won success is acknowledged at several points. *The Shield* featured a female captain, Monica Rawlings, in season four, and Claudette herself later becomes captain; casting CCH Pounder in the role (and Glenn Close as Rawlings) enhances the character's presence and power. Yet, despite - or even because of - male and female characters that apparently blur gender roles, major power here still flows between men, and women are used as objects of exchange or dominance.

### **Fantasy and Potential Subversion: 'You can't rape a machine'**

If US detective shows work to create a certain kind of authenticity in representing sexual violence, it is important to remember that fantasy drama does not exclude an aesthetic of realism: emotional realism is apparent in character development and fantastic elements are set in a material reality. Moreover, fantasy can provide safe distance from serious issues and its creation of whole new worlds offers 'the very real notion of a culture beyond gender differentiation and sex role stereotyping' (Feasey, 2008: 67). Horeck suggests that rape 'is a crime that dominates public fantasies regarding sexual and social difference' (2004: 4) and since difference, as well as

power, are often key themes of fantasy drama, rape can be a discernible motif. Like the crime shows, the fantasy drama *Battlestar Galactica*, falls into a genre traditionally classed as masculine (science fiction). Furthermore, it is committed to a realist aesthetic, as discussed in detail by Dylan Pank and John Caro, who note that a tradition of material realism in science fiction literature has influenced aesthetic choices in science fiction television (2009: 203). Given that science fiction often functions to defamiliarize the familiar, Pank and Caro argue that in *Battlestar Galactica* the recognizable realism of material objects from our past (phones with cords, camcorders) are attention-grabbing to the point of causing an oscillation between defamiliarization and familiarization (205). This extends from aesthetic style to thematic concerns so that American values are tested and ‘apparently immutable assumptions can start to look vulnerable’ (211). This mingling of the familiar and the alien can be applied to the show’s negotiation of gender as much as to its overtly political aspects.

Unlike science fictions set in the ‘real’ world which must confront contemporary constructions of gender, *Battlestar Galactica* takes place in an indeterminate time where space travel is possible and humans live on twelve planet ‘Colonies’. The series begins in peacetime; a war has been fought against artificial life forms called Cylons, created by humans, but they have now retreated from human contact. That is, until the Cylons ‘evolve’ into a new form, biological androids which are indistinguishable from humans (marking a significant difference from the 1970s *Battlestar Galactica*). The new bioCylons appear human, but there are only a certain number of models from which countless copies or clones are made. Cylons do not die: their consciousness is downloaded into new bodies if they are killed. The Cylons now

attack and reduce the human population to a fragment, a cluster of ships on an odyssey for a new home with only the battlestar *Galactica* to protect them. Among the human characters who begin this mission are: technophobic Commander William Adama; star fighter pilot Kara ‘Starbuck’ Thrace; scientist Gaius Baltar, who unwittingly aided a Cylon agent in attacking humanity; and schoolteacher turned education minister Laura Roslin, who becomes president of the remaining human population. Mistaking the inclusion of female characters as gender/sex equality, at least one scholar assumes that because *Battlestar Galactica* allows women to be fighter pilots or presidents, it is utopian in gender terms (Moore, 2008: 110).

*Battlestar Galactica* is, in fact, more nuanced as it uses science fiction to de/familiarize a gendered power dynamic and, just as Horeck notes of female-authored crime fiction, ‘sexual violence is a way of establishing the female heroine’s vulnerability, but also, significantly, her determination and resistance’ (2004: 128).

Nominally science fiction, *Battlestar Galactica* has also been called ‘a war show’ by its creators (David Eick in Martin, 2007). Thus, given the high incidence of rape during wartime, it is unsurprising that rape is a crucial aspect of the show. Susan Brownmiller’s seminal *Against Our Will* argues, ‘rape is the act of a conqueror. This . . . helps explain why men continue to rape in war’ (1993: 35). Both humans and Cylons use sex and sexual violence as a strategy. Seduction is adopted by the Cylons: by seducing scientist Baltar, the Cylon model Six manages to infiltrate the Colonies’ defences, secure mainframe access codes and facilitate the success of the Cylon attack. Thus it seems her body, in this version a blonde *femme fatale* later known as Caprica Six, has been designed to capture men. The connection between Baltar and Six forged here continues: he survives the apocalyptic attack and thereafter frequently

interacts with a Six visible only to him, a ‘hallucination’ still imbued with sexual power. This develops further when in ‘Pegasus’ (2.10), he is sent to interview a captive Cylon on the newly rediscovered battlestar *Pegasus*: the captive is another version of Six (named Gina), but one so abused by her captors that she is barely recognizable. The rape of Cylon prisoners by humans is apparently intended to ‘highlight the real-life abuse of prisoners’ (Bassom, 2006: 63). While ‘real-life abuse’ would be inflicted on male prisoners, the show makes its victims female: the Cylons Gina and Athena (a model Eight).

Torsten Caeners notes ‘a consistent portrayal of the Cylons as victims’ (2008: 370) but there are differences in the treatment of males and females. When captive Cylon Leoben is interrogated by Kara in ‘Flesh and Bone’ (1.08) there is no overt indication that he is subject to deliberate sexual abuse, nor are human male prisoners like Helo, Tyrol, Baltar, or Tigh<sup>6</sup> (though viewers might read this as a subtext). Kara states of Leoben, ‘It’s a machine, sir. There are no limits to the tactics I can use,’ but these tactics do not include rape. Whether Leoben responds like a man or a machine, he is not presented as a rapeable object.

This contrasts the treatment of the Six, Gina, whose story is told in ‘Pegasus’ and in *Razor* (a *Battlestar Galactica* television movie giving the back-story of the *Pegasus*). Both texts reveal how the female commander, Admiral Cain, orders deliberate ‘degradation’ (implicitly sexual) to be enacted on Gina, making her a rapeable object in a mode that is never used as blatantly with men, though as with female rape in *The Shield*, male characters attempt to rescue the victims and to secure justice. In ‘Pegasus’, this is made clear by Baltar’s desire to save the violated Gina (who as a

vulnerable, powerless woman may be preferable to Caprica Six) and it also emerges when Cain, having taken command of the fleet, orders her dubious methods of interrogation to be used on a pregnant model Eight, Athena, currently in the brig on *Galactica*. Athena's violation by Cain's man, Lieutenant Thorne, is intercut with scenes of the *Pegasus* Marines bragging about Thorne's encouragement of Gina's gang rape. Helo, Athena's lover, and Tyrol, previously the lover of another Cylon model Eight (Boomer), both protest against this boasting (as does a female technician) but soon realize that Athena is under threat. Editing thus simultaneously deflects full attention away from the horror of the attack and privileges male agency. Furthermore, Alison Peirse notes the difference between the version of the attack that aired on television and the DVD version (2008: 130, note 1); several commentators observe that the scene of assault was cut for US broadcast. Peirse reads the version aired as implying that Helo and Tyrol save Athena from rape, the DVD version as demonstrating that they do not, though the event is described in *The Official Companion* as 'an attempted assault' (Bassom, 2006: 63). Typically for television, more is implied than shown: the one explicit shot is of Athena's buttocks, exposed as Thorne jerks down her trousers. Most of the action is conveyed through tight close-up shots that suggest rather than reveal, and that convey immediacy and confusion. Even so, director Michael Rymer notes that extra footage was discarded: 'we needed to get rid of a lot of it, simply because it was so horrific' (in Bassom, 2006: 63).

Urgency is conveyed by Helo and Tyrol's race to the brig and their intervention saves Athena the extensive physical and psychological injury suffered by Gina. When Thorne strikes his head during the altercation and dies, the focus shifts almost entirely to male-centredness<sup>7</sup> (see Figure 2) as the plot follows the arrest of Helo and Tyrol,

their court martial and sentencing to death for treason and murder. The incident thus becomes ammunition in the struggle between Commander Adama and Cain. In this case, Cain's gender appears immaterial; she uses rape as an articulation of power, as men do (a variant of what Carine Mardorossian in this volume calls rape by proxy, perhaps). (Though Cain's lesbian relationship with Gina, revealed in *Razor*, re/views her order to 'degrade' the Cylon prisoner as emotionally motivated and perhaps potentially feminized). Cain's condoning - even suggesting - Gina's rape, and the responses of Gina, Athena, and various male characters to their violation all assume, even prove, that *these* Cylons do not just behave like humans: they behave like women. Tama Leaver notes that after Athena's rape, Adama calls her 'she' not 'it': the incident is designed to provoke 'protective reactions, in both viewers and characters' in contrast to the belief, stated by a *Pegasus* officer, that 'You can't rape a machine' (2008: 136). Athena's pregnancy underlines this and feminizes her further, while her position as vulnerable victim is also constructed by her 'girl-next-door' ordinariness and emotional ties (contrasting Six's usual glamour and heightened sexuality). The rape and torture of Gina is shocking, therefore, and exacerbates the effect of Athena's rape but it is the latter that the narrative privileges here and which the audience are likely to find more disturbing, simply because they know this character better. The humanizing (or feminizing) of Athena then spills over to Gina, who, adopting a very human urge for vengeance, eventually kills Cain in a rape-revenge scenario that suggests she recovers agency but also conveniently solves the tension within the hierarchical power structure ('Resurrection Ship Part 2' 2.12).

Rape is not confined to humans, however. While the Cylons can reproduce technologically, religious belief prompts them to investigate procreation. When



fighter pilot Kara (call sign Starbuck) is hospitalized on Cylon-occupied Caprica after being shot, she becomes suspicious that she is being held by the Cylons, and finds human women hooked up to machinery on escaping ('The Farm' 2.05). She calls this rape and it is linked with medical procedures carried out on her own body. An unexplained 'second scar' near the bullet wound on her abdomen implies that the Cylons have removed ovaries/ eggs from her. This extends the notion of physical violation and though the image of women penetrated by machines is not a typical representation of rape, it is a visualization familiar from science fiction and horror, one that presents violation of the female body as abject spectacle.

Given that her character is about role reversal (Starbuck was male in the original 1970s *Battlestar Galactica*), Kara presents typically 'masculine' behaviour in her professional, personal and sexual life; she screws around, has one night stands and affairs, not unlike McNulty and Greggs in *The Wire*. The choice of Kara then for this act of violation in 'The Farm' is made for the effect of suddenly seeing her feminized. While Carla Kungl argues that Kara's combination of traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics distinguishes her from previous representations of tough women (2008), writer Carla Robinson admits that in 'The Farm' she 'wanted to put Starbuck, a fierce character, in a truly vulnerable position' (in Bassom, 2006: 41). Robinson makes Kara a feminized victim, like those fictional female investigators noted by Horeck. Thus fantasy does not preclude typical gender scripts. Similarly, Kim Greggs is a victim of violence early in *The Wire*, made more vulnerable because of her gender when she is shot as part of an undercover sting ('The Cost' 1.10). A masculinized attitude is adopted by (and sometimes critiqued in) male *and* female characters in both shows but Kim and Kara's sudden vulnerability in such instances

has more impact because of their gender. This is conveyed by the responses of male characters: Kara's friends in the fleet are visibly appalled at her mistreatment here and later at the hands of Leoben (see below), though to a certain extent these violations are aligned with many other violent incidents which represent oppressive military occupation. In *The Wire* Kima's detective colleagues are shown behaving emotionally, rather than professionally, at the scene of her shooting: McNulty cradles her bleeding body in his arms, while Carver holds his head in his hands in disbelief and the objective camera shots, ostensibly from the helicopter above, intensify rather than dissipate the impact.

Another instance of Kara's feminization occurs in her relationship with the Cylon Leoben. During his interrogation, Leoben tells Kara that she has a destiny and that he, as a religious believer and visionary, can help her find it. This is revisited when she is held prisoner by him in an apartment on Cylon-occupied New Caprica: he tells her 'God wants us to be together' and that he has 'seen' it happen ('Occupation' 3.01). In a series of increasingly disturbing scenes, he sets out a meal for them, only for her to stab him repeatedly and continue eating while he dies, downloads into an identical Cylon body, and reappears to carry on as before. (This is the scene described at the opening of this chapter). When Kara continues to resist, he brings a child, Kacey, to the apartment, telling Kara that the child is her daughter, raised from the ovary taken during 'The Farm' (though this later proves false). When an uprising frees the human population, Kara is rescued by her husband but returns to the apartment for Kacey and has a final confrontation with Leoben. He asks her to say that she loves him, as his vision foretold; she does, they kiss and Kara stabs and kills him again, then escapes with Kacey. Sexual violence is never overt in this arc, which spans four episodes

(3.01-04), though Peirse examines it as a form of rape-revenge narrative, arguing that ‘the threat of sexual violence is implicit’ from the start of Kara’s captivity and ‘sexual dominance. . . is the end aim’ (2008: 128). While the male rape story in *The Shield* had another man raped in revenge for Vic’s violent assault, this story has a typical female rape-revenge resolution, familiar from films like *I Spit on Your Grave*, where male aggressors are seduced by their victim, attacked and often castrated, then left to die. Like these characters, Leoben is both rapist and victim and his (Cylon) body provides the abject spectacle, not the female, especially since here rape is only implied, never visualized. (Shots of Kacey’s watching face that are intercut with Kara killing Leoben, add a disturbing dimension to the experience of witnessing rape, perhaps more so because Kacey shows no emotion, unlike the witness to Aceveda’s rape in *The Shield*). For Peirse, Leoben is ‘overcome by lust and at his most vulnerable’ when Kara kills him and escapes (128), but the situation seems more complicated and Leoben’s mysticism adds a further wrinkle. Caeners identifies how the Cylons are ‘obsessed with finding a way to procreate like humans do and. . . fascinated by the human concept of love’ (2008: 371) and this offers a nuanced, if no less unsettling, explanation of Leoben’s behaviour.

The show’s sexualized violence works to suggest that power struggles between humans and Cylons are gendered. Discussing the rape of transgender Brandon Teena in the film *Boys Don’t Cry*, Horeck observes that ‘It is only by positioning him as a rapeable object that the men can reassert dominant lines of sexual difference’ (2004: 112). Arguably, in *Battlestar Galactica* humans try to subordinate Cylons by making them rapeable objects, a categorization that tends to redraw lines of difference (human/ Cylon) as gendered (male/ female). The Kara/ Leoben story is an interesting

angle, but even here, the female character is the target of sexual aggression, if not a passive victim. Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. suggests that all sex in *Battlestar Galactica* is related to violent domination – ‘Play becomes violent and even sex becomes a kind of game for dominance, a competition not just for survival but for mastery over others’ (2008: 78) – and arguably this is just an extrapolation of rape, the gendered noun ‘mastery’ being particularly suggestive. The show offers what first appear to be familiar rape scripts (female victim rescued by heroic males, female victim captured by male stalker) but the fantastic element of the Cylons complicates issues. Moreover, sex, violence, and emotion always co-exist, with each case involving lovers, ex-lovers or obsessive attachment, and featuring high emotional intensity confused by political motivation (torture as a tool in war) and religious belief (Kara’s destiny, Athena’s child), suggesting that how we read rape is still confused by other factors. The Cylons may be pure science fiction but their use in rape scenarios draws attention to the dynamic of power and how gender is a dominant discourse in reading this dynamic.

### **The End?**

Discussing Aceveda’s rape, Shawn Ryan, creator of *The Shield*, describes how the team discussed whether the character should ‘get roughed up, or have his life threatened, but we felt we had seen that before’ (in Keck, 2004). He is keen to emphasize that the show ‘is not exploiting a controversial issue for a single episode’s shock value’ (Keck, 2004), yet to an extent all the examples discussed above offer action and shocking violation as an attraction, despite their condemnation of characters like Vic or rapists like Thorne. There is an inherent problem with presenting rape as part of ‘entertainment’ even if the form of entertainment is capable of offering complex negotiations of gender and power. The shows adopt various

strategies to offset this, either by not actually showing rape, or by presenting it unambiguously as a violation of a key character in whom the audience are invested.

Of course, crime shows like *The Shield* and *The Wire* reflect sexist behaviour and attitudes and while some viewers might interpret this, as I have done, as a challenge to certain constructions of masculinity, others simply read the surface signals and assume they endorse or even glamorize such behaviour. All three shows attempt to deconstruct gender distinctions, though *The Wire* limits its female characters, with very few exceptions, to traditional roles and behaviours. Such gender ambiguity leads not only to female characters like Kima, Claudette and Kara, but inevitably changes the representation of men. Thus the range of masculinities in *The Shield* includes the cerebral, nerdy Dutch, and family man, politician and rape victim Aceveda, as well as the hypermasculine Vic. Helo and other males often function as objectified bodies as well as rounded characters in *Battlestar Galactica*, while characters like the sentimental Adama or mystic Leoben offer more masculinities.

Blurring traditional gender distinctions and establishing rape as a crime of violence and power, as all three shows do, proves it need not be gendered, or simply a female problem. Male rape in *The Shield* highlights this but foregrounds male power as vital to the scenario (potentially sidelining women, as in *The Wire*). *Battlestar Galactica* seems to use sexual violence deliberately to re-feminize characters. However, if its realism is engaged in a project of de/familiarization, then rape is both recognizable (and more so when women are its victims) and distanced (some of the recognizably female victims are actually Cylons, as are some of the male rapists), allowing for a very complex set of responses and a re-visioning of the dynamic of power that both

removes gender from the equation and insists on it. Defamiliarization suggests that a woman, or any rapeable object, is reduced to the status of unfeeling machine, dehumanized by the power dynamic of victim and rapist, while the aesthetic of realism starkly presents the traumatized, all-too-human responses of victims. This fantasy show is able simultaneously to reproduce the denial of subjectivity that is so disturbingly documented in *The Wire* and to challenge such denials and give voice to the ‘victims.’

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<sup>2</sup> One attack in a connected series of murders gets onscreen as video surveillance but the women were hidden in a cargo container and no such diegetic loophole is available.

<sup>3</sup> This changes in the next season with the appearance of Snoop though, like Kima Greggs, she fits in by being masculinized.

<sup>4</sup> As also seen when an ex-girlfriend accuses Aceveda of rape in season one; or in a minor incident during season four of *The Wire*.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Stacey Abbott for pointing this out and for stimulating discussion of both *The Shield* and *The Wire*.



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<sup>6</sup> At the time they are held prisoner, Tyrol and Tigh are thought to be human by both humans and Cylons and are treated accordingly. Later, revealed as Cylons, there is still no indication that they might be raped.

<sup>7</sup> Athena is briefly allowed to challenge male interpretation of her rape. When asked whether the men who assaulted her were from the *Galactica* or the *Pegasus*, she replies, ‘they were from the *Pegasus*, so what?’ questioning distinctions between ‘bad’ and ‘good’ humans, as well as dismissing the tension between the two commanders. She also questions the use of the word ‘attack’ as a euphemistic description (‘The attack? Is that what we’re calling it now?’) (‘Resurrection Ship Part 1’ 2.11), offering an interesting contrast to Aceveda’s avoidance of the term ‘rape’ in *The Shield*.